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ABSTRACT

The Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986 increased the numbers of families eligible for special needs assistance, yet information concerning these families is minimal. This study explored the needs of families of preschool children with disabilities by comparing their family processes, parenting style, and children's social and cognitive outcomes with those of families without special needs children. Subjects were 49 mothers and 31 fathers with a child (24-56-months of age) enrolled at an inclusive university-based preschool. Fifteen parents had a child with an identified special need. Scores on the Self-Report Family Inventory indicated that, compared to families without special needs, families of children with special needs experienced lower levels of family satisfaction and closeness and higher levels of authoritarian parenting; the children were seen as less academically and socially competent than their typically-developing peers. Contains 12 references. (JPB)

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ED 421 208

# Families of Children with and without Special Needs:

# A Comparison of Family Processes

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Since the passage of P.L. 99-457, The Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986, family practitioners and child educators have faced greater challenges in their work with families of children with disabilities. The challenges are due in part to the increased numbers of families eligible for services and the paucity of information concerning these families. Previous research suggests that parents of children with special needs experience high levels of stress (Frey, Greenberg, & Fewell, 1989). In families of typically-developing children, life stress is associated with dysfunctional family processes (Beavers & Hampson, 1990) and nonoptimal parenting (Belsky, 1984; Pettit, Clawson, Dodge, & Bates, 1996). Relatively little is known, however, about the family processes and parenting that occur in families of children with special needs. Because family functioning and parenting style make important contributions to children's development (Belsky, 1984; Gottman & Katz, 1989; Pettit et al., 1996), it is critical to understand these dynamics in all families, including those who have children with special needs. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to compare family processes, parenting style, and children's social and cognitive outcomes in families of children with versus those without special needs.

## Method

### Subjects

Subjects were 49 mothers and 31 fathers with a child (24- to 56-months of age) enrolled at an inclusive university-based preschool. Fifteen parents had a child with an identified special need.

### Procedure

Parents were asked to independently complete a series of questionnaires. The Self-Report Family Inventory, a 36-item Likert scale assessment of individuals' perceptions of family style, was used to assess family functioning. Four composite scores were calculated according to the formulas provided by Beavers and Hampson (1990), and included: health/competence (alpha = .85), conflict (alpha = .89), cohesion (alpha = .61), and emotional expressiveness (alpha = .74). From the Raising Children Questionnaire, a 49-item Likert scale assessment of self-reported parenting style, three composite scores were created were created based on subscales developed from raters' independent classification of items

into parenting styles (agreement = 97%) as defined by Baumrind (1967): authoritative (alpha = .80), authoritarian (alpha = .78), and permissive (alpha = .67). Your Child's Behavior is a 20-item Likert-scale assessment of parents' views of their children's social and school skills. Two composite scores were created: peer competence (alpha = .72) reflecting children's skills with peers, such as developing close relationships with other children, solving disagreements without aggression, and being a fun playmate, and cognitive development (alpha = .88) which reflects school skills, such as ability and interest in learning, interest in books and reading, and ability to count and understand numbers.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Family processes. Ranges, means, and standard deviations for all three domains (i.e., family processes, parenting style, and child developmental outcomes) are provided in Table 1. Scores on the competence scale ranged from 20.00 to 55.00 (out of a possible 95) with a mean of 31.73. The conflict scale ranged from 12.00 to 39.00 (out of a possible 60) with a mean of 18.99. Scores on the cohesion scale ranged from 6.00 to 14.00 (out of a possible 26) with a mean of 9.70, and the emotional expressiveness scale ranged from 5.00 to 15.00 (out of a possible 25) with a mean of 7.56.

Parenting style. Scores on the authoritarian subscale ranged from 28.00 to 68.00 (out of a possible 95) with a mean of 46.56; the authoritative subscale ranged from 35.00 to 69.00 (out of a possible 70) with a mean of 61.96, and the permissive subscale ranged from 9.00 to 30.00 (out of a possible 35) with a mean of 18.44.

Child developmental outcomes. Scores on the cognitive development subscale ranged from 13.00 to 25.00 (out of a possible 25) with a mean of 19.46, and the peer competence subscale ranged from 12.00 to 44.00 (out of a possible 45) with a mean of 28.72.

### Intercorrelations among Variables

To examine the relations among variables, correlations were computed within and between domains for the full sample. Of the family processes (see Table 2), competence was positively related to

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Family Processes, Parenting Style, and Child Developmental Outcomes Variables

| | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | sd |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Family Processes* | | | | |
| Competence | 20.00 | 55.00 | 31.73 | 8.15 |
| Conflict | 12.00 | 39.00 | 18.99 | 6.86 |
| Cohesion | 6.00 | 14.00 | 9.70 | 2.38 |
| Expressiveness | 5.00 | 15.00 | 7.56 | 2.90 |
| *Parenting Style* | | | | |
| Authoritarian | 28.00 | 68.00 | 46.56 | 9.44 |
| Authoritative | 35.00 | 69.00 | 61.96 | 5.52 |
| Permissive | 9.00 | 30.00 | 18.44 | 4.38 |
| *Child Outcomes* | | | | |
| Cognitive Development | 13.00 | 25.00 | 19.46 | 3.20 |
| Peer Competence | 12.00 | 44.00 | 28.72 | 6.10 |

conflict ($r$ = .82), cohesion ($r$ = .50), and emotional expressiveness ($r$ = .69). Conflict also was positively correlated with cohesion ($r$ = .26) and emotional expressiveness ($r$ = .46). Of the parenting styles (see Table 3), authoritative was inversely associated with authoritarian ($r$ = -.28) and permissive ($r$ = -.36) parenting styles. Correlations between the child developmental outcomes variables (see Table 3) revealed that cognitive development was positively correlated with peer competence ($r$ = .32).

Correlations between family processes and parenting styles (Table 4) revealed that authoritative parenting was negatively associated with family competence ($r$ = -.42), conflict ($r$ = -.41), and emotional expressiveness ($r$ = -.25), whereas authoritarian parenting was positively related to family competence ($r$ = .23), conflict ($r$ = .26), and expressiveness ($r$ = .31). Permissive parenting was associated with high

Table 2: Within Domain Correlations: Family Process Variables

| | Competence | Conflict | Cohesion |
|---|---|---|---|
| Competence | | | |
| Conflict | .82** | | |
| Cohesion | .50** | .26* | |
| Expressiveness | .69** | .46** | .11 |

scores on family conflict ($r$ = .38). Correlations between children's developmental outcomes and family processes domains revealed that children's cognitive development was inversely associated with family competence ($r$ = -.26) and expressiveness ($r$ = -.37), whereas children's peer competence was positively associated with family cohesion ($r$ = .36). Additionally, children's cognitive development was negatively associated with the authoritarian parenting style ($r$ = -.48).

Table 3: Correlations among Parenting Styles and Child Outcomes

| | Authoritarian | Authoritative | Permissive | Cognitive |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Parenting Style* | | | | |
| Authoritarian | | | | |
| Authoritative | -.28* | | | |
| Permissive | .12 | -.36** | | |
| Child Outcomes | | | | |
| Cognitive Development | -.48** | .06 | .09 | |
| Peer Competence | -.22 | -.17 | .06 | .32** |

Table 4: Between-Domain Correlations: Family Processes with Parenting Styles and Child Outcomes

| | Competence | Conflict | Cohesion | Expressiveness |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Parenting Style* | | | | |
| Authoritarian | .23* | .26* | -.04 | .31** |
| Authoritative | -.42** | -.41** | -.17 | -.25* |
| Permissive | .11 | .38** | -.01 | .03 |
| *Child Outcomes* | | | | |
| Cognitive Development | -.26* | -.14 | .04 | -.37** |
| Peer Competence | -.01 | -.09 | .36** | -.21 |

Differences between Families with and without Children with Special Needs and Parent Gender

Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were computed in order to examine the multivariate differences between (a) parents who had children with identified special needs and those who did not (means listed in Table 5), and (b) mothers and fathers.

Family processes. In the first MANOVA, special needs and parent gender were examined as a function of the family processes variables. Analyses revealed a main effect for special needs, $F$ (4, 72) = 3.54, $p < .01$. No other effects were statistically significant. Follow-up univariate tests indicated that compared to families with typically-developing children, families with special needs children experienced lower levels of cohesion, $F$ (1, 75) = 4.09, $p = .05$ and marginally higher levels of expressiveness, $F$ (1, 75) = 3.46, $p = .07$

Parenting style. In the second MANOVA, special needs and parent gender were examined as a function of parenting styles. Analyses revealed main effects for special needs, $F$ (3, 66) = 9.44, $p < .001$ and parent gender, $F$ (3, 66) = 5.59, $p < .002$. Follow-up univariate tests indicated that compared to families with typically-developing children, families with special needs children were characterized by higher levels of authoritarian parenting, $F$ (1, 68) = 22.38, $p < .001$ and lower levels of authoritative

Table 5: Differences in Family Processes, Parenting Styles, and Child Developmental Outcomes by Presence of Special Needs

| Variable | Special Needs | No Special Needs | F | df | p< |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Family Processes* | | | | | |
| Competence | 34.53 | 31.08 | ns | | |
| Conflict | 20.53 | 18.63 | ns | | |
| Cohesion | 8.60 | 9.95 | 4.09 | 1, 75 | .05 |
| Expressiveness | 8.80 | 7.28 | 3.46 | 1, 75 | .07 |
| *Parenting Style* | | | | | |
| Authoritarian | 57.73 | 44.54 | 22.38 | 1, 68 | .001 |
| Authoritative | 58.45 | 62.59 | 9.99 | 1, 68 | .002 |
| Permissive | 18.91 | 18.36 | ns | | |
| *Child Outcomes* | | 19.85 | 5.27 | 1, 68 | .03 |
| Cognitive Development | 17.27 | | | | |
| Peer Competence | 23.72 | 29.62 | 8.97 | 1, 68 | .004 |

parenting, $F$ (1, 68) = 9.99, $p < .01$. Follow-up univariate tests also revealed that compared to fathers, mothers reported higher levels of authoritative parenting, $F$ (1, 68) = 16.13, $p < .001$ (mean for mother = 63.42; mean for father = 59.52) and lower levels of permissive parenting, $F$ (1, 68) = 4.54, $p < .04$ (mean for mother = 17.44; mean for father = 20.11).

Child developmental outcomes. In the third MANOVA, special needs and parent gender were examined as a function of child developmental outcome variables. Analyses revealed a main effect for special needs, $F$ (2, 67) = 5.68, $p < .005$. No other effects were statistically significant. Follow-up univariate tests indicated that compared to parents with typically-developing children, parents with

special needs children viewed their children as having lower levels of cognitive development, $F$ (1, 68) = 5.27, $p$ = .03 and less competent with peers, $F$ (1, 68) = 8.97, $p$ = .004

## Conclusions

### Descriptive Summaries

Overall, parents scored in low- to middle-ranges on family process measures of competence, conflict, cohesion, and expressiveness scales of the Self-Report Family Inventory. As this study was conducted with a non-clinical sample, these low scores are somewhat surprising. It is possible that they reflect the stress associated with having a young child.

Whereas scores were created to reflect three parenting styles, most parents scored in the low- to middle-range of the authoritarian scale and high on the authoritative scale. These scores were not unexpected, given that the current sample is comprised primarily of European-American, middle class parents. Authoritative parenting in this group repeatedly has been found to be associated with positive child outcomes (Baumrind & Black, 1967). If the sample had been more ethnically diverse, greater variability on these subscales may have been found. Indeed, previous research suggests that specific parenting styles may have different implications for child outcomes, depending on ethnicity (Baumrind, 1972; Chao, 1994; Torres-Villa, 1995).

Parents' reports of their children's developmental outcomes indicated that children's cognitive development scores were relatively high and peer competence scores were mid- to relatively high. Although children's scores may be inflated due to parental bias, it is likely that children in this sample were indeed cognitively and socially skilled. All children were enrolled by their parents at a university-based preschool in which academic and social success are emphasized. Previous research suggests that parents enroll their children in early childhood programs with similar goals and values (Holloway & Reichart-Erickson, 1989). In the current sample, then, both family and school experiences may have facilitated children's development in social and academic domains

Relations among Variables

Variables within domains were associated with each other in meaningful and expected ways. Parents who viewed their families as happy, healthy, and competent also saw low levels of unresolved conflict and high levels of togetherness, closeness, and the expression of warmth. Parents who reported using high levels of warmth and appropriate discipline with their children also reported less use of restrictiveness and harshness or lack of control. Children viewed as cognitively skilled also were seen as socially competent with peers.

Variables between domains showed some unexpected relations, perhaps due to low scores on the family process variables or the lack of variability on the parenting style subscales. As expected, however, children's competence with peers was associated with family satisfaction and closeness, and children's school success was associated with lower levels of authoritarian parenting. These findings support previous research indicating that both family processes and parenting styles are influential in children's social and cognitive development (Belsky, 1984; Baumrind, 1972; Gottman & Katz, 1989).

Differences between Families of Children with and without Special Needs

Families of children with special needs experienced lower levels of family satisfaction and closeness and higher levels of authoritarian parenting. If a family is overwhelmed by the stress of caring for a special needs child (Frey et al., 1989), processes occurring within the family, such as family closeness and satisfaction, may be adversely affected. Additionally, a child-effects perspective (Bell, 1968) would suggest that a special needs child may "elicit" authoritarian parenting by requiring high levels of monitoring and control on the part of the parent.

Special needs children were seen as less academically and socially competent, compared to their typically-developing peers. It is possible that special needs children do indeed suffer deficits in school and social skills, perhaps due to the nature of their disabilities. Academic and peer problems also may arise from dysfunctional family processes (Gottman & Katz, 1989; Grynch & Fincham, 1990; Howes & Markman, 1989) or nonoptimal parenting practices (Pettit et al., 1996).

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